



STATE OF CONNECTICUT

DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS' AFFAIRS
OFFICE OF THE COMMISSIONER
287 West Street
Rocky Hill, Connecticut 06067

Department of Veterans' Affairs Testimony to the Committee on Veterans' Affairs February 23, 2016

Good afternoon, Senator Mae Flexer, Representative Jack Hennessey, ranking members, and esteemed members of the Veterans' Affairs Committee:

I am Thomas Saadi, Chief of Staff and General Counsel for the State Department of Veterans' Affairs and I am here on behalf of Commissioner Sean Connolly who is currently in Washington D.C. I thank you for your work on behalf of Connecticut Veterans and for the opportunity to address you today. While the Commissioner supports of several of the committee's raised bills my testimony will generally focus on bills related to the Department's operations.

I would first like to discuss the concepts raised in bills 201 and 206. The expansion of Connecticut Wartime Service Medals to service members on active duty and to Veterans who died between November 12, 1918 and December 31, 1999, is laudable and well deserved, however it will require an increase of Departmental resources to process applications and award potentially thousands of additional medals. Since 2005 the Department has proudly awarded more than 34,000 of such medals without additional staff or funding and increasing the number of medals awarded could impact limited resources and increase the time frame for application processing and awarding of medals.

Raised Bill 205 incorporates many of the recommendations of the Department's Connecticut Women Veterans' Program report. That said, elements of this legislation would require diversion of Department resources that currently provide direct services Connecticut Veterans, female and male. The Department would welcome the opportunity to work with the committee to find ways to accomplish many of these laudable goals without requiring reallocation or additional resources. Additionally, several of the items outlined in the bill are already underway at the Department. I will briefly discuss these items below.

The Department is exploring the development of a women veterans services training module as set forth in section 1 of the bill. The Department has been reviewing and updating our VSO training, which covers a broad range of federal, state and local benefits, services and assistance for all Veterans - female and male. We have been communicating directly with the Federal VA CT Healthcare System Women Veterans Program Manager in this process. Also, the Department has scheduled two training sessions in 2016 for all municipal veterans' service contact persons. We are open to expanding that training to include representatives of the state public institutions of higher education as contemplated in the bill.

Additionally, the Department is in the process of redesigning its website with a focus on our core services in a user-friendly platform to include specific women Veterans information as contemplated in section 4 of the bill.

The Department supports the creation of Non-commercial Sustaining Announcements (NSAs) encouraging Veterans to participate in the Department's Veterans registry set forth in Section 3 of the bill. We'd like to respectfully inform the committee that such authority already exists and the Department has investigated the issue, finding that NSAs, unlike Public Service Announcements, would cost a minimum of fifty thousand dollars to run annually on radio. The Department will continue to review this issue and should resources allow, will develop such NSAs as well as other NSAs and PSAs to inform Veterans of the core services provided by the Department which include: long-term chronic disease healthcare, residential and rehabilitative services and advocacy and assistance for veterans and eligible dependents.

The Department supports raised Bill 197, the designation of Veterans as a protected class and respectfully asks you to consider expanding the proposed protection to include current members of the Armed Forces, including National Guard and Reserve components. At the Department we have learned of instances of discrimination against these personnel and while I served as an Assistant Attorney General and as a Judge Advocate in the Army Reserve I investigated many such instances of discrimination against National Guard and Reserve personnel. While certain federal protections apply to these personnel broader protection at the state level would provide greater and more accessible protections for our military personnel.

The Department thanks the committee for raising bill 208 which contains technical changes to increase clarity and consistency and update many outdated terms and definitions related to the Department.

The Department thanks the committee for raising bill 5353 which eliminates the two-year residency requirement for admission to the Department's residential services program. Such requirement is no longer needed or appropriate. Denying housing to an otherwise eligible Veteran solely for not having lived in CT for two continuous years is inconsistent with best practices of assisting Veterans in need of housing. The bill also addresses inconsistent language in which one statutory section implies that service "in time of war" is a precondition for eligibility while a subsequent and more specific section contains no such precondition.

I thank you for your time and am happy to respond to questions.